

Quest for Christian Unity and the Case for 'Theological Method' challenges Nigerian theologians to return to the dialectical, doctrinal and systematic functions of theology so as to address the question of Christian unity. Englebert Beyer's "God's Grace and Human Cooperation" treats the issue of justification in the Roman-Catholic and Lutheran World Federation Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. He shows how the Declaration represents a step in the direction of doctrinal consensus between Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

Finally, Jude Asanbe's "Canonical Perspectives on Seniority Among the Yoruba and Its Implications for Priestly Life" critically examines the issue of seniority in traditional Yoruba society and cites instances where the Code of Canon Law applies the norm of seniority. He sees here how the Code and Yoruba traditions can facilitate a more effective evangelization.

THE ACT OF BEING: AQUINAS' METAPHYSICS AS FRAMEWORK FOR A NEW ANTHROPOLOGY

Michael Akpoghiran, O.P.

Introduction

Until the momentous Thomistic revival of the last century, many critics of Thomas Aquinas thought he brought no new insights to metaphysics. He was allegedly a faithful interpreter and diligent disciple of Aristotle. His commentary on Aristotle's metaphysics, for example, was seen only as a pedagogical amplification of the original solutions of his master, Aristotle, whom he called "The Philosopher". If Thomas Aquinas did bring some new solutions to metaphysics, it was thought, such solutions were only tangential, never pivotal, to the original insights of Aristotle. They were only "marginal corrections not touching the fundamental lines of Aristotelian constructions".¹ But in the last few decades, it has been discovered that Thomas Aquinas did offer new solutions to the field of metaphysics. His insights regarding both human and divine realities depended on the fact that his metaphysical vision of reality was new and original.

One of the pillars of this original metaphysical edifice is the act of being (also called "act of existing" or sometimes simply "existence").² The act of being is a profoundly original pearl Thomas Aquinas discovered on the metaphysical pathways abandoned by his predecessors. But to discover the act of being, Aquinas continued his inquiry into being

¹ Bautista Mondin, *A History of Mediaeval Philosophy* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1991), p. 310. Henceforth: *Bautista Mondin, A History of Mediaeval Philosophy*. Mondin, in this work, argues that the critics of Aquinas were wrong.

² In this essay, "act of being" is sometimes interchanged with "act of existing", or "existence". This variation is necessitated by the context, particularly when one of the variants is used by an author in consideration. However, whenever "existence" is used, it is understood in the sense of an act, a sense which very often is lacking in popular usage of the word.

in depth, to the determination of the inner nature of being. He studied being far enough to find out that which precisely makes it a being (the act of being). He not only discovered that the act of being is the perfection of every perfection, the act of every act, he also discovered that in beings there is a radical distinction between their essence and their act of being.

The aim of this essay is twofold: first, it shows how Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of the act of being both brings a radically new solution to metaphysics and responds to the problem of essence and existence³ which had agitated metaphysicians before him. Secondly, it shows that in the arena of the contemporary philosophical conversation on the nature of the human person, the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas provides a veritable metaphysical framework upon which such a conversation must be grounded. We shall proceed by examining Thomas Aquinas' original insight of the act of being, and how it differs significantly from the view of his predecessors. Next, we shall consider the doctrine within the ontological ambience of the human being, and show how from within the context of its expression in the human being we are led to an unequivocal affirmation of God, the Subsistent Being. The emerging results will provide a metaphysical framework for the contemporary philosophical conversation on the nature and value of the human person.

Metaphysical Path to the Act of Being

Already, in one of his early works, *De Ente et Essentia*, Thomas Aquinas had begun the investigation of being, of the meaning of the two notions of essence and the act of existence (the act of being); and how these notions were realized in being. This investigation "brought him face to face with an issue that had agitated all the philosophers and had led to their metaphysical doctrines and their disagreements."⁴ In pursuing this

investigation further, Thomas knew he was treading a torrid metaphysical path, for it is precisely the investigation of being that had created the diverse and often discordant tones in the community of metaphysicians, from Plato to Maimonides. But Thomas was determined to embark on this journey. On this metaphysical sojourn, Thomas met his great predecessors—he met Plato and Aristotle; he met Plotinus, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Moses Maimonides. He did not wholly agree with them; neither did he discard all they had to say. He conversed with them, harmonizing the ways followed by his predecessors, taking from each one of them a part of the way that ought finally to lead to the truth.⁵ Having consulted and conversed with the great teachers before him, Thomas Aquinas constructed an original and magnificent metaphysical edifice that, while considering what had been laid down before, brought the investigation of being to an illuminating arena never visited by his predecessors.

In his investigation of being, of the inner constitution of being, Thomas realized that there is a radical distinction between what a thing is and that a thing is. He discovered that the questions, "What is it?" and "Does it exist?" are really distinct questions which lead to radically distinct answers. The answers provided to these questions had polarized metaphysicians. What accounts for what a thing is? Most metaphysicians would seek an answer in the essence of the thing, for essence is that which makes a thing what it is. Metaphysicians of the Aristotelian persuasion would go further to identify this essence of a thing with its substantial form, for Aristotle himself identified the essence of a thing with the substantial form. In raising those questions about being, Thomas was thus confronted with two fundamental questions that would decisively influence the history and problem of the philosophy of being, and at the same time bring Thomas to his discovery of the act of being. First, is there anything in a substance that requires it to be? Second, if the essence of a thing is its substantial form, what happens, in material beings, to the matter? In other words, is matter not part of the essence of a material

³ There is need here to clarify Thomas Aquinas' understanding of existence. Aquinas' use of "existence" includes the sense of actuality by which existence is an act. We do not often find this sense in the common usage of existence. This is why it is sometimes more appropriate, when referring to Aquinas' notion of existence, to speak of "act of existing" or "act of being".

⁴ Anton Pegis, *St. Thomas and Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1964), p. 3. Henceforth: Anton Pegis, *St. Thomas and Philosophy*.

⁵ Cf. Anton Pegis, *St. Thomas and Philosophy*, p. 4.

human being has an existence in the real world. In this case, essence has to be distinct from existence. Aquinas expresses this clearly when he argues:

Whatever is not of the understood content of an essence or quality is something which comes from without and makes a composition with the essence, because no essence can be understood without the things which are parts of it. Now, every essence or quiddity can be understood without anything being understood about its existence. For I can understand what a man is, or what a phoenix is, and yet not know whether they have existence in the real world. It is clear, therefore, that existence is other than essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there exists a thing whose quiddity is its existence.⁹

It is precisely this that led Thomas to affirm that besides essence there must be an act by which a thing is. For example, besides essence, the human being must have an existence. The human being is not only an essence, a substantial form, or a soul. The human being also has what St. Thomas calls "esse" or "actus essendi", an act of existing, an act of being; and it is this act of being that makes the human being to be. The essence makes a thing what it is, but the act of being makes to be, to exist. This act of being is the act of all acts. It is the act of the substantial form, it is the act of even the accidents. A substance is in potency to act of being, to the act of existence. It does not have existence by its nature. The essence has to be actualized by the act of being. Thomas Aquinas knew that his predecessors did not pay much attention to this distinction. This is where Thomas Aquinas' discovery lay.

Of course, before Thomas, there had been attempts by metaphysicians to distinguish between essence and existence. Islamic philosophers like Alfarabi (d. c. 950), Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037) and Algazel (d. 1111) had made this distinction. But they spoke of existence as an "accident", though Avicenna argued that it cannot be an accident like other accidents.¹⁰ Aquinas saw what the Islamic philosophers said; he saw

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, 77.

¹⁰ F. C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Maryland: Penguin Books, 1955), pp. 102-103. See Avicenna, *The Metaphysics*, I, 11.

being? We shall come to the second question later; we begin now with the first.

For Aquinas, there is nothing in the substance that requires it to be. There is nothing in the essence that requires it to exist. In other words, it is one thing to know what a thing is, and another thing to say whether or not it exists. For the question, "what is it?" is only a question about the essence of a thing. Besides the question of what a thing is, there is still need to raise the question whether or not that thing actually exists. For example, the following two statements are logically and really distinct. "Mike is human." "Mike exists." The former speaks of what Mike is, his essence; the latter says Mike possesses an act (existence) and as such we can say he really is. In other words, while the former speaks of Mike's essence, for as Aquinas says, essence means that through which and in which a being has its act of existing,⁶ the latter speaks of his existence. But as Thomas argues, the essence in which a being (ens) has its act of existing is distinct from the act of existing itself (esse).⁷ This means that essence which is always in potency to receiving an act of existing cannot be the act which realizes the potency. This is how Aquinas himself expresses it:

Every being, since it is not the act of being itself, has its being received in something, through which the being is restricted; hence in every being the essence of the being which participates in the act of being is one thing, and the participated being is another.⁸

In *De Ente et Essentia*, Aquinas makes a clear case for this distinction between essence and existence. He argues that it is possible to conceive of the essence of a thing without understanding anything about the existence of that thing. It is possible, for example, to understand the essence of a human being (the essence is humanity) without knowing whether the

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, 11.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas would say that a being (ens) possesses existence (esse). Since esse is an act, Aquinas also speaks of esse as "actus essendi" (the act of existing, or act of being).

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *De Spiritu creat.* a. 1

in part the view of Avicenna that even though existence was an accident, it was not like other accidents. Aquinas investigated the nature of being deeper, and he discovered that existence is the act by which a substance has being; and for him, it would be absurd to say that the act by which a thing ever is should be an accident. As Copleston puts it, "It would be absurd to say, for example, that Peter is white, tall, existing, and amusing."¹¹ For if Peter did not exist he could be neither white nor tall nor amusing. Aquinas speaks of act of existence as that which is most intimate in being,¹² and he even sees existence as the highest perfection of all.¹³ How could act of existence which is the act of every act, the perfection of every perfection be numbered among the accidents or attributes of being? This approach, for Aquinas, was absurd. Having seen the decisive limitation of the approach of the Islamic philosophers, and on the basis of his more profound inquiry, Aquinas took the question of essence and existence to a higher level of discourse never attained by his predecessors and brought to the question new dimensions never envisaged by the same predecessors. One of such dimensions is the application of the act of being to the human being.

The Act of Being

If we apply the distinction of essence and existence to the human being, it follows that the human being is a composite of essence and existence. If the human being were to be essence only, it would not exist, it would not be. For the human essence is not to exist, but to be human. To exist, the human being has to receive existence. Without this act of existence, the substantial form would not be, and the substance would not be. Without existence, therefore, there would be nothing. This understanding brought Aquinas, again, face-to-face with the second fundamental question that had agitated metaphysicians before him.

The second question that Thomas was confronted with was: if the essence of a thing is its substantial form, what happens to matter? If the

¹¹ F.C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Maryland: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 103.

¹² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 8, a. 1.

¹³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9.

essence of material beings is the substantial form only, what becomes of material dimension of such beings? In the case of the human being, if the essence of the human being is the soul only (the soul being the substantial form), does that mean that the body is not included in the essence of the human being? Taking the human being as the zenith of material substances, Thomas says the human being is essentially a material being, and so the essence of the human being includes both form and matter, that is, both soul and body. Thomas observes that the two distinct parts into which being is divided—essence and existence—penetrate each other, so that they make up a single reality. The human being is a composite being, composed not only of essence and existence, but also of matter and form, which though distinct are united in such a way that when the human being acts, it is one being that acts.

Thomas also observes that the human act of existence, as with all created beings, is not perfect, in the sense that it is not an absolute act of existing. The perfection belonging to a created being is never a complete, absolute, total and infinite perfection belonging to the nature of the being itself. Rather, it is always a restricted and limited perfection. Confronted with this reality, Thomas continued his investigation of being further; and he found out what it is in beings that limits the perfection of being. Thomas found that, if being, considered absolutely, is infinite, and if the existence of some being is finite, then there must be something in being that limits the act of existing.¹⁴ Thomas discovers that in being this principle of limitation is the essence, for it is the essence that limits a being to a particular mode of being, it is the essence of the human being, for example, that makes the human being exist as human being, not as all and every being. A human being cannot exist in plural modes; for example as cat, dog, monkey and human at the same time because the essence limits its mode of existence to the human mode of existence. Thus, with respect to the perfection of being, the essence is always a limited capacity; it is a recipient that cannot take the immense ocean of being; being can only enter it partially.¹⁵ But is this the case with every being? Can there be an infinite and subsistent being, whose act of

¹⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. I, ch. 43.

¹⁵ Battista Mondin, *A History of Medieval Philosophy*, p. 313.

existence is so perfect, so absolute that there cannot be any limitation? Thomas Aquinas' inquiry takes him to a deeper discovery, the Subsistent Being.

Path to the Subsistent Being

In his investigation of the nature of the unity of essence and existence in being, Thomas raised a question: how is that the two co-principles (essence and existence) into which being is divided are so united that they both make up a single whole? He discovers that there can be only one response: the uniting of essence and existence into a single being is possible only through the intervention of an extrinsic cause, a cause which not only unites essence and existence into a single whole, but also produced essence and existence before bringing them together. Thomas expresses this clearly when he said:

It is necessary that all things in which existence is distinct from their essence have their existence from another. Since everything that exists in virtue of another requires something that exists for itself as a cause, there must be something which would be the cause of being for all others, precisely because this cause is only being. Otherwise, one would proceed into an infinity of causes, since everything that is not only being has a cause, as has been said.¹⁶

In this supreme being, there is no distinction between essence and existence, otherwise it too will require another extrinsic cause to bring its essence and existence together, and thus we will go into an infinite regress. In the *Summa Theologiae*, he argues for this more elaborately:

God is not only His own essence...but also His own existence. This may be shown in several ways. First, whatever a thing has besides its essence must be caused either by the constituent

principles of that essence (like a property that necessarily accompanies the species—as the faculty of laughing is proper to a man—and is caused by the constituent principles of the species), or by some exterior agent—as heat is caused in water by fire. Therefore, if the existence of a thing differs from its essence, this existence must be caused either by some exterior agent or by its essential principles. Now it is impossible for a thing's existence to be caused by its essential constituent principles, for nothing can be the sufficient cause of its own existence, if its existence is caused. Therefore that thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another. But this cannot be true of God; because we call God the first efficient cause. Therefore it is impossible that in God His existence should differ from His essence. Secondly, existence is that which makes every form or nature actual; for goodness and humanity are spoken of as actual, only because they are spoken of as existing. Therefore existence must be compared to essence, if the latter is a distinct reality, as actuality to potentiality. Therefore, since in God there is no potentiality, as shown above [S.T.I, q.3, a.1], it follows that in Him essence does not differ from existence. Therefore His essence is His existence. Thirdly, because, just as that which has fire, but is not itself fire, is on fire by participation; so that which has existence but is not existence, is a being by participation. But God is His own essence, as shown above [S.T.I, q.3, a.3] if, therefore, He is not His own existence He will be not essential, but participated being. He will not therefore be the first being—which is absurd. Therefore God is His own existence, and not merely His own essence.¹⁷

From the analysis of Thomas, we see that the distinction between essence and existence in finite being inevitably leads us to the affirmation of a supreme being, who holds essence and existence together, uniting them into a single reality. In this supreme being, essence is identical with existence, unlike the case with finite beings. Thomas identifies this

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 4.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, ch.4.

supreme being with God. God's essence is his existence. It follows therefore that the discovery of the profound distinction between essence and existence in finite being leads us ultimate to God. This discovery will have decisive implication for our understanding of the human being.

Implications for Contemporary Personalist Philosophy

In investigating the composite and unitary nature of the human being to its depth, Thomas provides an enduring metaphysical groundwork for the fundamental questions that would typify personalistic conversations of the twentieth century. Twentieth century's philosophy of the human person (described as "personalism") was faced, and sometimes polarized, by the decisive problem of providing an unalienable foundation of the value of the human person. One of the greatest personalists, Emmanuel Mounier, devotes an unspeakable length of his time investigating this question of the nature and values of the human person, and developing what could be truly today called "personalism".¹⁸ In the depth and breadth of their investigation, most philosophers of the human person have almost been confronted with the question of the origin, nature and value of the human person. For example, in his *Philosophical Anthropology*, Battista Mondin begins his inquiry with the same question: "Who is man?" According to Mondin:

this is the interrogative of all interrogatives—the most pressing and piercing interrogative of all. It is an old interrogative, yet it is always new; ... It is an interrogative that everyone must affront and resolve—first of all for one's self, and only secondarily for others, hoping that his own solution of the human enigma is valid for others as well.¹⁹

¹⁸ See Emmanuel Mounier *A Personalist Manifesto* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1938) and also Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952).

¹⁹ Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1985), p.1.

Mondin agrees with other philosophers that the question concerning the nature of the human being, its place in the world as well as the nature of human existence assumes a renewed urgency at all times. Here, the insights of Thomas Aquinas offer an illuminating path. As contemporary personalists continue the conversation on the dignity and ontological value of the human person, they will discover that the original and radical metaphysical edifice constructed by Thomas, the discovery of the act of being and its attendant expression in the human being, will provide the decisive metaphysical framework upon which their conversation must be grounded. Let us consider how the insights of Thomas provides a theoretical framework for contemporary conversation on the human person.

In the second book of his *Physics*, Aristotle affirmed that a knowledgeable person does not have complete knowledge of a thing until that person knows *why* it is. To know the *why* of a thing is to know its causes. Hence, true knowledge of things requires the knowledge of its causes. In the case of our inquiry on the human being, the radical distinction in the human being, between essence and existence has fundamental implications for contemporary philosophy's knowledge of the human person. If, as we have shown, essence and act of existence are co-principles united in the human being by God, and since it follows that God is the cause of the human being, it follows that we cannot possess a complete knowledge of the human being without reference to the efficient cause of the human being, namely God, who holds the human essence and existence together into one being. In other words, if as Aristotle says, a thing is best understood when studied from its causes, and if the human being has God as its cause, it follows that the human being is best understood within the ambience of what God himself says about the human being.

All this does not in any way enfeeble the natural and social sciences which study the human being. Their studies remain valid, yet they only look at the human being from a perspective; they do not provide answers to the most fundamental questions of the origin and end of the human being. It is one thing to inquire how human life persists or even how human beings came to be, but it is an altogether different question to ask "Why is there human life?" Put in a more personal parlance, "Why

am I here?" "Who am I?" "Where am I coming from and where am I going?" According to John Paul II, these are fundamental questions which pervade the human life.²⁰

For philosophy which places the questions about the meaning of human life at the centre of its attention, the answers which philosophy provides will never assuage the human mind's quest for profound answers if philosophical inquiry ignores a reflection on the cause of the human being. That is why Pope Paul II states that

While, on the one hand, philosophical thinking has succeeded in coming closer to the reality of human life and its forms of expression, it has also tended to pursue issues—existential, hermeneutical or linguistic—which ignore the radical question of the truth about personal existence, about being and about God.²¹

Even for some philosophers of a certain existentialist persuasion who affirm that the human being finds itself inserted in the world, the question of why the human being have to exist at all in the world remains a disturbing issue.

For the on-going personalist conversation, it means that the human being with all its experiences, all its questions about the meaning of its existence, can only be fully understood in the light of divine revelation. To understand the human being in its fullest ontological sense, it is God who sheds the light on the human being. What all this means is that the authentic anthropology must be a new anthropology, a theological anthropology. This is precisely the point that Thomistic metaphysics brings to personalism.

Conclusion

We set out in this essay to accomplish a twofold task: first, to show how Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of the act of being both brings a radically new

²⁰ Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998), no. 1.

²¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998), no. 5.

solution to metaphysics and responds to the problem of essence and existence which had agitated metaphysicians before him. Secondly, we set out to show that in the arena of the contemporary philosophical conversation on the nature of the human person, the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas provides a veritable metaphysical framework upon which such a conversation must be grounded. We began by examining how Thomas built his original metaphysical edifice of the act of being. We also showed how this insight, when applied to the human being, leads us to an unequivocal affirmation of the Subsistent Being. From the affirmation of the Subsistent Being, we showed how this insight of Aquinas provides a theoretical foundation upon which contemporary philosophical conversation on the nature of the human person must rest. And the foundation upon which such a conversation must be based is an authentic anthropology according to which the fundamental questions about the human being, about human life and existence, find their ultimate and unequivocal answers in the Subsistent Being, who, by uniting essence and act of being in the human being, is the cause of the human being. Today's personalist philosophy, therefore, must turn to this new anthropology which emerges from the metaphysical edifice constructed by Thomas Aquinas.